

GAMES

FAQ

Q Should I buy a DirectX 9 graphics card or wait for cheaper DirectX 10 cards to be released?

A Nvidia has finally announced its mid-range GeForce 8 series graphics cards, and ATI will have made an announcement regarding its new range of graphics cards by the time you read this. It's too early to tell which manufacturer's cards will be the best value for money, but new graphics cards always demand a high price as stock levels are low.

Fortunately, there's no rush to get a DirectX 10 (DX10) graphics card into your PC. This is because virtually no games support DX10 at present, with Supreme Commander being the only one as we went to press. Most of the games launched this year and next will also run on DirectX 9 cards. Even EA's Crysis, the best-looking of the upcoming DX10 games, will also be playable on a DX9 card.

However, the graphics card market moves very quickly, and the longer you can put off buying a new card, the better. If you need a graphics card now to play the latest games, don't worry about buying a DX9 card, as it will be time to upgrade again before DX10-exclusive games become the norm.

Seth Barton

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SONY PlayStation 3

★★★★★

£400 inc VAT

Sony's PlayStation 3 looks impressive, and at 5kg you certainly know where your £400 has gone. Though bulky, it has a built-in power supply, unlike the external brick-like one used with the Xbox 360. It's also far quieter than the Xbox 360 when running games.

On the rear is an HDMI output, the first standard video output we've seen on a games console. There's also an AV Multi output, which supports component, RGB SCART, S-video and composite video. The HDMI socket supports version 1.3, so you can output lossless audio, such as Dolby TrueHD, to a compatible surround-sound amplifier. Alternatively, you can output Dolby Digital using the optical S/PDIF or analogue Dolby Pro-Logic II through the AV Multi output. At present, there's no VGA lead available, and no official support for connecting monitors using an HDMI-to-DVI lead. HD resolutions of 720p, 1,080i and 1,080p are available though component and HDMI, although Virtua Tennis 3 is the only game to support 1,080p at present.

The Sixaxis joypad looks almost identical to the PlayStation 2's DualShock controller. However, the rumble feature has been removed and tilt sensors, similar to those in the Wii remote, have been added. The lower shoulder buttons on the front of the joypad have been replaced with triggers, but pulling them is awkward and makes the joypad shift in your hands. It's not as good as the Xbox 360's controller, although it's a neat touch that you can recharge them by plugging them into one of the front USB ports.

There's also built-in Gigabit Ethernet and wireless networking, so accessing online content is

simple. There's not much content available at the moment, but expect more as more games are released.

Turn it on and you're quickly faced with the minimalist interface. This looks great and makes it easy to find everything you need, unlike the Xbox 360's often confusing Dashboard. The PlayStation 3 can play a wide variety of media files from external devices or its own 60GB hard disk.

The selection of games is currently rather limited and most are already available on the Xbox 360. Motorstorm is the best of the release titles, as it's fun to play and looks fantastic. However, we saw nothing here graphically that couldn't be achieved on the Xbox 360. Furthermore, the Xbox 360 has a more impressive range of exclusive titles coming up, such as Halo 3, while many big games, such as Grand Theft Auto IV, are launching on both consoles simultaneously.

The PS3 can play Blu-ray discs, too. The results are equal to any dedicated Blu-ray player we've seen, making the PS3 the cheapest Blu-ray player you can buy.

If all you want is a games console, the Xbox 360 has a better range of games and a better joypad. However, with Blu-ray playback, wireless networking, a 60GB hard disk and a great interface on which to browse media files, the PlayStation 3 is a more versatile, if expensive, alternative.

Seth Barton



SUMMARY

- ✓ Blu-ray drive
- ✓ Great interface
- ✗ Expensive for just games

GAMES CONSOLE HDMI, AV-Multi, Optical S/PDIF outputs, four USB2 ports, Bluetooth, Blu-ray drive

PRODUCT CODE B0007SV734

SUPPLIER www.play.com

DETAILS http://uk.playstation.com

Top 5 games

1. Supreme Commander

£18 inc VAT ★★★★★



This RTS has the biggest battles ever seen on a PC. There's a vast range of units to command and the graphics are slick, but you'll need a powerful PC to run it smoothly.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.supremecommander.com FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



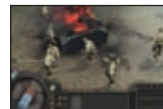
2. Company of Heroes

£14 inc VAT ★★★★★



This game looks fantastic, from the historically accurate units to the bombed-out French towns. But it's the innovative gameplay that makes it the best RTS around.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.thq.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



3. FIFA 2007

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



The fully licensed teams and slick presentation have always been welcome, but FIFA 2007 is easier to play than its predecessor. Arguably, the best football game around.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS http://fifa07.ea.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



4. FlatOut 2

£12 inc VAT ★★★★★



FlatOut 2 includes outrageous crashes that let you send your driver through the windscreen and into the road. It's also a brilliant racing game.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.flatoutgame.com FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



5. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

£15 inc VAT ★★★★★



The most stunning role-playing game we've ever played. It looks amazing, and there's so much to it you could play it for a month and still have loads left to do.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS www.elderscrolls.com FULL REVIEW Jul 2006





▲ Much more than an expansion pack, Shivering Isles is a game in its own right

2K GAMES

The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

★★★★★

£15 inc VAT



If you've fought your way through The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and defeated Mehrunes Dagon, you're probably suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Fortunately, 2K Games has released a new expansion pack: Shivering Isles.

Usually with an expansion pack you get a couple of extra levels and some new weapons and spells, but Shivering Isles is pretty much a game in its own right. Set in the realm of Sheogorath, the Daedric Prince of Madness, it's separate from Oblivion with its own set of missions and ultimate objective. You can leave at any point, though, and go back to the original Oblivion world to carry on there.

The main plot, which involves helping Sheogorath prevent his realm being destroyed, is every bit as involving as Oblivion's main plot. Each mission gives you a new insight into the world you've entered. There's also a massive range of new side missions to battle your way through. In total, there are around 30 hours of extra gameplay. The graphics are as lush as ever, too, with the high dynamic range landscapes looking scarily realistic.

Shivering Isles isn't quite perfect. It suffers from the same problems as Oblivion. Once you've been playing the game for hours, your inventory will be full of hundreds of items, making it hard to find a specific thing. The missions are often formulaic and easy to complete. For example, if you come across a locked door, you never have to wander far to find the key or switch.

These are minor problems with an otherwise excellent game. The immense new world, range of characters and tons of missions all breathe new life into Oblivion. Not only is it the best expansion pack we've played, it's also better than a lot of standalone games.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Whole new world to explore
- ✓ Lots to do
- ✗ Missions can be too easy

ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 1GB disk space, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
PRODUCT CODE TT52740
SUPPLIER www.dvd.co.uk
DETAILS www.theelderscrolls.com



▲ Make one tactical mistake in Frontline and your tanks will be smoking wrecks

PARADOX INTERACTIVE

Frontline: Fields of Thunder

★★★★

£18 inc VAT

Hammy voice acting and ludicrous accents have been an integral part of real-time strategy (RTS) games since the original Command and Conquer. Frontline: Fields of Thunder breaks the mould by using real German and Russian voices for its tank crews and infantry, which gives a more realistic feel to its battlefields.

Frontline is by Nival Interactive, which developed the Blitzkrieg RTS games, and deals with the 1943 tank battles between German and Russian forces around the city of Kursk. It looks very similar to the Blitzkrieg series, which is no bad thing. Towns and villages are lovingly modelled, explosions look realistic and there are detailed smoke and debris effects when you run over buildings and trees.

Unlike most RTS games, there is no base building in Frontline. You start each mission with a set number of men and vehicles, and these are reinforced only once you complete certain objectives. The game is also unforgiving. You're given the bare minimum of resources to prevail and one error can cost you the battle. If you make one tactical mistake, your tanks will be smoking wrecks before you realise what's going on.

You can call upon reconnaissance planes to scout for long-range artillery and fighter aircraft to strafe enemy positions, but you can call on air reinforcements only a certain number of times during each mission. This doesn't make the game any less frustrating, though. Even if you launch an attack under cover of your reconnaissance planes, you can still lose half your battalion to hidden anti-tank weapons before they even appear onscreen.

Frontline: Fields of Thunder looks good and may appeal to those who like a masochistic challenge. But it's too difficult and frustrating to recommend to the average gamer.

Chris Finnamore

SUMMARY

- ✓ Detailed 3D graphics
- ✗ Frustrating missions
- ✗ Too difficult

REAL-TIME STRATEGY GAME Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 4GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000LW9TEU
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.paradoxplaza.com



▲ Racing is not the only focus in Test Drive Unlimited, although cruising is enjoyable

ATARI

Test Drive Unlimited

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

Test Drive Unlimited (TDU) is rare in that it's a car game in which racing isn't the only focus. Instead, collecting is the real attraction. While a traditional online game would have you feverishly hunting down a magical sword, TDU has you saving up make-believe money for a Lamborghini, Jaguar or even a Ducati (there are bikes available, too).

Races, either solo or against other players, are merely a means to win the cash you need for these vehicular treats. This is just as well, as the racing is fun but patchy. The handling is exaggerated rather than realistic, while the courses are repetitive. The real fun comes from simply cruising around in your shiny new ride, either cheerfully hitting 180mph in a 30mph zone and terrorising the local traffic, or simply taking in the sights as a Sunday driver.

The game is set on a Hawaiian island, with miles of beautiful beach, town and forest road, all free to roam without interruption. If you're online, the island is shared with other players as well as computer-controlled drivers. A quick flash of your headlights throws down the gauntlet for a custom race there and then. You can either race against real-life online opponents or the computer. Alternatively, you can enter pre-set challenges or just play violent dodgems on a busy highway.

Entering a race temporarily cuts you off from the world at large, so there's no risk of a passing road hog ruining your progress. It's this kind of forethought that makes TDU a leisurely but compulsive experience, making big leaps forward for driving and online games alike.

While other online games are all about fantasy, it's refreshing to see a game that tries something different. TDU almost pulls it off, but the tracks and actual racing will need to be improved.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Open and beautiful
- ✓ Seamless blend of solo and multiplayer
- ✗ Racing is a tad crude

DRIVING GAME Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 256MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000GBANV4
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.testdriveunlimited.com